

PREFACE

IN this book I have not attempted to write the conventional biography of a canonized saint, but a study in Italian history centred in the work and personality of one of the most wonderful women that have ever lived—the successor of Dante in the literature and religious thought of Italy, the connecting link between St. Francis of Assisi and Fra Girolamo Savonarola in the strange pageant of the progress of the mystical chariot of the Spouse, which the divine poet saw in part on the banks of Lethe in the Earthly Paradise. While devoting my attention mainly to Catherine's own work and her influence upon the Italian politics of her age, I have endeavoured at the same time to make my book a picture of certain aspects, religious and political, of the fourteenth century in Italy—the epoch that immediately followed the times of Dante, the stormy period in the history of the Church of which Petrarca and Boccaccio witnessed the beginnings. It may, indeed, be said that so much attention has been paid to Italian history of late years, and so many fresh sources of original information made accessible in every direction, that a new life of the woman who was the truest and most single-hearted patriot of her age seems not only permissible, but even—from the scientific point of view—necessary. In this undertaking, I have been greatly aided by the manuscripts still preserved of Catherine's letters, manuscripts full of unpublished matter which has hitherto been unaccountably neglected, having apparently escaped the notice of all her biographers and editors : matter which throws light upon every aspect of the Saint's genius, and has enabled me, at many points, to correct the hitherto accepted chronological order of her writings and the events in her life to which they refer.

Our contemporary materials for the life of Catherine of Siena, apart from isolated documents and the general history of her